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ABSTRACT

This paper stresses the need for consumer education programs which reflect social changes and which will be relevant in the future. Specifically, it explores ways in which educators can develop and implement consumer education programs which stress quality of life, simplified lifestyles, and changing American consumption habits. Quality of life is interpreted to include a degree of excellence in lifestyle that could be available to all citizens, rather than wealth, privilege, affluence, and materialism. Many of the ideas upon which recommendations for changes in consumer education curricula are based derive from a contemporary social movement called "Voluntary Simplicity." One of the best known advocates of this simplicity movement, Michigan Senator, Philip A. Hart, is often cited throughout the paper as an example of an intelligent and thoughtful consumer. Recommendations regarding how to develop consumer education programs based on quality of life concepts are presented in three areas--consumer decision making, consumer resource management, and consumer citizen participation. Recommendations include teaching students how to make a conscious effort to reduce nonessential possessions, encouraging students to become less dependent on large institutions, stressing knowledge and skills needed for citizen participation, helping students understand how consumption habits affect other people and the environment, and helping students mesh their desired lifestyle with their career goals and future earning capacity. The conclusion is that educators should learn more about the simplicity movement and should incorporate its objectives and concepts into consumer education programs. (DB)

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CONSUMER EDUCATION IN A QUALITY OF LIFE SOCIETY*

by

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SO 013 707

CONSUMER EDUCATION IN A QUALITY OF LIFE SOCIETY*

Rosella Bannister
Office of Consumers' Education

ARE THERE SMALL CHANGES THAT YOU AND I COULD MAKE TO REDUCE THE CLUTTER AND COMPLEXITY OF OUR LIVES? ARE AMERICANS CHANGING THEIR ATTITUDES ABOUT WHAT THEY NEED AND WANT IN LIFE? IS IT POSSIBLE THAT BY SIMPLIFYING OUR LIFE-STYLES WE CAN ACTUALLY INCREASE THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR OURSELVES AND OTHERS?

THESE SEEMINGLY SIMPLE QUESTIONS DO NOT HAVE EASY ANSWERS. YET, I BELIEVE THAT CONSUMER EDUCATORS HAVE AN IMPORTANT LEADERSHIP ROLE TO PLAY IN HELPING PEOPLE GAIN A SENSE OF POWER AND DIRECTION REGARDING CHANGING AMERICAN CONSUMPTION HABITS AND LIFESTYLES.

LET'S BEGIN OUR SEARCH FOR ANSWERS BY LOOKING AT THE LESSONS TAUGHT TO US BY THE MAN WE HONOR EACH YEAR AT THE MICHIGAN CONSUMER EDUCATION CONFERENCE -- SENATOR PHILIP A. HART. BUILDING FROM THE EXAMPLE OF PHIL HART'S LIFE, I WANT TO EXPLORE THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MOVEMENT CALLED "VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY", AND LOOK AT ITS APPLICATION TO CONSUMER EDUCATION. AND FINALLY, I'D LIKE TO DISCUSS ACTIONS WHICH WE MUST TAKE IF CONSUMER EDUCATION IS TO HAVE SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE ON SHAPING THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN THE YEARS LEADING TO THE 21ST CENTURY.

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*The Philip A. Hart Consumer Education Address, delivered at the Annual Michigan Consumer Educat on Conference, Bay City, Michigan, October 23, 1981.

WHEN THE CONSUMER EDUCATORS OF MICHIGAN (CEM) INVITED ME TO DELIVER THE 1981 PHILIP A. HART ADDRESS, I IMMEDIATELY FELT A KEEN SENSE OF PRIDE AT BEING CHOSEN BY MY CO-WORKERS, AND THAT FEELING HAS GROWN IN RECENT WEEKS AS I LEARNED MORE ABOUT THE REMARKABLE MAN WE HONOR EACH YEAR. MANY OF YOU WILL REMEMBER THAT IN THE FALL OF 1976, WHEN SENATOR HART WAS VERY ILL, CEM RECEIVED PERMISSION FROM HIS FAMILY TO ESTABLISH THE ANNUAL CONSUMER EDUCATION ADDRESS IN HIS HONOR. ESTHER SHAPIRO, DIRECTOR OF THE DETROIT OFFICE OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS GAVE THE FIRST ADDRESS. IN 1977 WE HONORED MICHIGAN'S ATTORNEY GENERAL FRANK KELLEY; IN 1978 JOE TUCHINSKY OF THE MICHIGAN CITIZEN'S LOBBY; IN 1979 KATHLEEN O'REILLY, THEN DIRECTOR OF THE CONSUMER FEDERATION OF AMERICA; AND IN 1980, MICHIGAN REPRESENTATIVE LYNN JONDAHL.

IN 1981 AS WE ARE AGAIN REMINDED OF THE LEGACY WE WERE GIVEN THROUGH THE EXAMPLE OF PHIL HART'S LIFE. A FEW DAYS AGO I SPENT SOME TIME IN THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, SEARCHING THE CONGRESSIONAL RECORD FOR WORDS THAT DESCRIBED THE PHIL HART PHILOSOPHY ON THE QUALITY OF LIFE.(1)(2) THIS IS WHAT I FOUND:

WHEN PHIL HART STARTED OUT IN POLITICS, HE TOLD A REPORTER, "I ENJOY AND THRILL AT IT. I WANT TO MAKE EVERY MINUTE COUNT AND LEAVE A RECORD THAT IS WORTHWHILE." HART KNEW WHAT WE CONSUMER EDUCATORS ARE SOMETIMES SLOW TO LEARN, THAT THE EFFECTIVE USE OF POLITICS CAN HELP MAKE A MORE HUMANE LIFE FOR EVERYBODY.

"IT IS EASIER TO SOLVE TECHNICAL PROBLEMS THAN SOCIAL PROBLEMS," HART SAID. "TEN YEARS IS ENOUGH TIME TO BUILD A SPACESHIP, BUT IS ONLY A BLINK OF AN EYE IN THE HISTORY OF MAN'S LONG ASSENT TOWARD A JUST AND HUMANE SOCIETY."

REGARDING TOLERANCE OF OTHER POINTS OF VIEW, PHIL HART SAID, "WE NEED TO AVOID ABSOLUTISM, ESPECIALLY THE NOTIONS THAT YOUR OWN CONCLUSIONS MUST BE CORRECT." HE WAS KNOWN, MUCH TO HIS STAFF'S IMPATIENCE, FOR SPENDING AS MUCH TIME EXAMINING AN OPPOSING POSITION AS IN PRESENTING HIS OWN.

IN HIS EIGHTEEN YEARS IN THE SENATE, PHIL HART PRACTICED A PERSONAL HUMILITY AND A STYLE OF POLITICS THAT ELEVATED NOT ONLY THE LEVEL OF THOUGHT BUT ALSO THE VOCATION ITSELF. HART REMAINED LOYAL TO THE GREEK ROOT WORD FOR POLITICS, POLITIKOS, WHICH MEANS "OF THE CITIZENS".

FORMER SENATOR ROBERT GRIFFIN, SPEAKING AT THE DEDICATION OF THE PHILIP A. HART VISITOR'S CENTER AT SLEEPING BEAR DUNES NATIONAL LAKESHORE, SAID, "WHEN I THINK OF PHIL HART, WORDS COME TO MIND LIKE GENTLENESS, KINDNESS, COMPASSION, INTEGRITY, INTELLIGENCE, DEDICATION, HUMILITY, AND ABOVE ALL, COURAGE. HIS WORK, OFTEN DONE QUIETLY AND BEHIND THE SCENES, HAS TOUCHED THE LIFE OF EVERY AMERICAN -- WHETHER IN CIVIL RIGHTS, CONSUMERISM, ANTI-TRUST OR THE ISSUES OF WAR AND PEACE."

ON THE ISSUE OF NATIONAL SECURITY, HART PLEADED FOR BALANCE BETWEEN SOCIAL COSTS AND WEAPON COSTS. THE WASHINGTON POST REPORTED THAT MUCH OF HART'S COMMITTEE WORK INVOLVED ISSUES THAT TOUCHED PEOPLE'S LIVES IN THE NEIGHBORHOODS AND SHOPS, AND SHOWED HOW THESE PEOPLE WERE OFTEN VICTIMIZED BY THE GOVERNMENT'S VALUE SYSTEM ON ARMAMENTS. "SOME OF THESE VALUES," HART TOLD A REPORTER, "HAVE HELPED CREATE THE MYTH THAT YOU CAN INCREASE OUR NATIONAL SECURITY BY INCREASING OUR ARMAMENTS...EVERY DOLLAR SPENT THAT WAY IS A DOLLAR DEPRIVED THE POOR, HEALTH SYSTEMS, EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS.

"IF WE HAD TAKEN JUST TEN PERCENT OF WHAT WE SPENT LAST YEAR ON ARMAMENTS," SAID HART, "AND PUT IT INTO TECHNOLOGY TO INCREASE AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY SO THE WORLD COULD BETTER FEED ITSELF, A PERSON COULD ARGUE WE COULD HAVE CONTRIBUTED MORE TOWARD SECURITY THAN WE GOT FROM THE BILLIONS WE SPENT ON WEAPONS."

AND THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS SAID, "THERE WAS NEVER ANY DOUBT AS TO HIS LOYALTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES -- ALL THAT MATTERED IN THE WORLD WERE HUMAN BEINGS. HE CHAMPIONED HUMAN CAUSES TO THE END."

THE DETROIT FREE PRESS SAID THAT PHIL HART WAS A KIND, GENTLE AND WISE MAN WHO TRIED TO MAKE LIFE BETTER FOR PEOPLE ...HE STOOD UP FOR WHAT HE BELIEVED IN: A DECENT CHANCE FOR ALL PEOPLE IN THIS COUNTRY, WHETHER THAT MEANT FEEDING THE POOR OR KNOCKING OVER RACIAL BARRIERS. HE WAS A MAN OF CONSCIENCE, THE MAN WHO FOUGHT FOR THE RIGHTS OF CONSUMERS.

IT WAS REPORTED THAT PHIL HART FELT PROFOUND DESPAIR IN HIS LAST MONTHS -- BECAUSE MORE HAD NOT BEEN ACCOMPLISHED, BECAUSE THE BASIC STRUCTURES OF THE ECONOMY HAD REMAINED MOSTLY UNCHANGED, BECAUSE NOT EVERYONE SHARED HIS VISION OF WHAT A BETTER AMERICA WOULD BE.

BUT THEN HIS DESPAIR VANISHED. "LET THE GUARD CHANGE," HE SAID. THAT WAS CHARACTERISTIC NOT ONLY OF HIS MODESTY, BUT ALSO OF HIS CONFIDENCE, A CONVICTION THAT THE FIGHTS FOR JUSTICE AND COMPASSION WERE CONTINUING STRUGGLES AND THAT OTHERS WOULD SURELY FOLLOW WHO WOULD GIVE AS MUCH AS HE HAD.

I THINK PHIL HART WOULD BE PLEASED TO KNOW THAT CONSUMER EDUCATORS ARE CONTINUING THEIR EFFORTS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR ALL PEOPLE, OFTEN WORKING BEHIND THE SCENES WITHOUT PERSONAL GLORY, RECOGNIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF USING THE POLITICAL PROCESS, TEACHING THE SKILLS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION, EXAMINING OPPOSING POINTS OF

VIEW ON CONTROVERSIAL CONSUMER ISSUES, AND ELEVATING THE HUMAN QUALITIES OF COMPASSION, INTELLIGENCE, AND INTEGRITY IN ALL OF LIFE'S DECISIONS.

USING THE EXAMPLE OF PHIL HART'S LIFE AS OUR CORNERSTONE, LET'S EXPLORE THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MOVEMENT CALLED VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY, CONSIDERING ITS APPLICATIONS TO CONSUMER EDUCATION, AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPACT ON THE QUALITY OF LIFE.

BY QUALITY OF LIFE, I DO NOT MEAN WEALTH AND PRIVILEGE, AFFLUENCE AND MATERIALISM, BUT RATHER A DEGREE OF EXCELLENCE IN LIFESTYLE THAT COULD BE AVAILABLE TO ALL CITIZENS IN THE SOCIETY. TO ME, A QUALITY OF LIFE SOCIETY ALLOWS FOR PERSONAL FREEDOM AND GROWTH, IT SHOWS CONCERN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, IT FOSTERS BALANCE BETWEEN CONSUMPTION AND NON-MATERIALISTIC VALUES, BETWEEN ECONOMIC STABILITY AND OTHER FACETS OF PERSONAL SATISFACTION.

CONSUMER EDUCATION IS THE PROCESS OF GAINING THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS NEEDED IN MANAGING PERSONAL RESOURCES AND TAKING ACTIONS TO INFLUENCE THE FACTORS AFFECTING CONSUMER DECISIONS. THE CONCEPTS OF CONSUMER EDUCATION CAN BE CLASSIFIED IN THREE MAJOR AREAS: CONSUMER DECISION-MAKING, CONSUMER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND CONSUMER-CITIZEN PARTICIPATION. SEE FIGURE 1, A CLASSIFICATION OF CONCEPTS IN CONSUMER EDUCATION, PAGE 7.

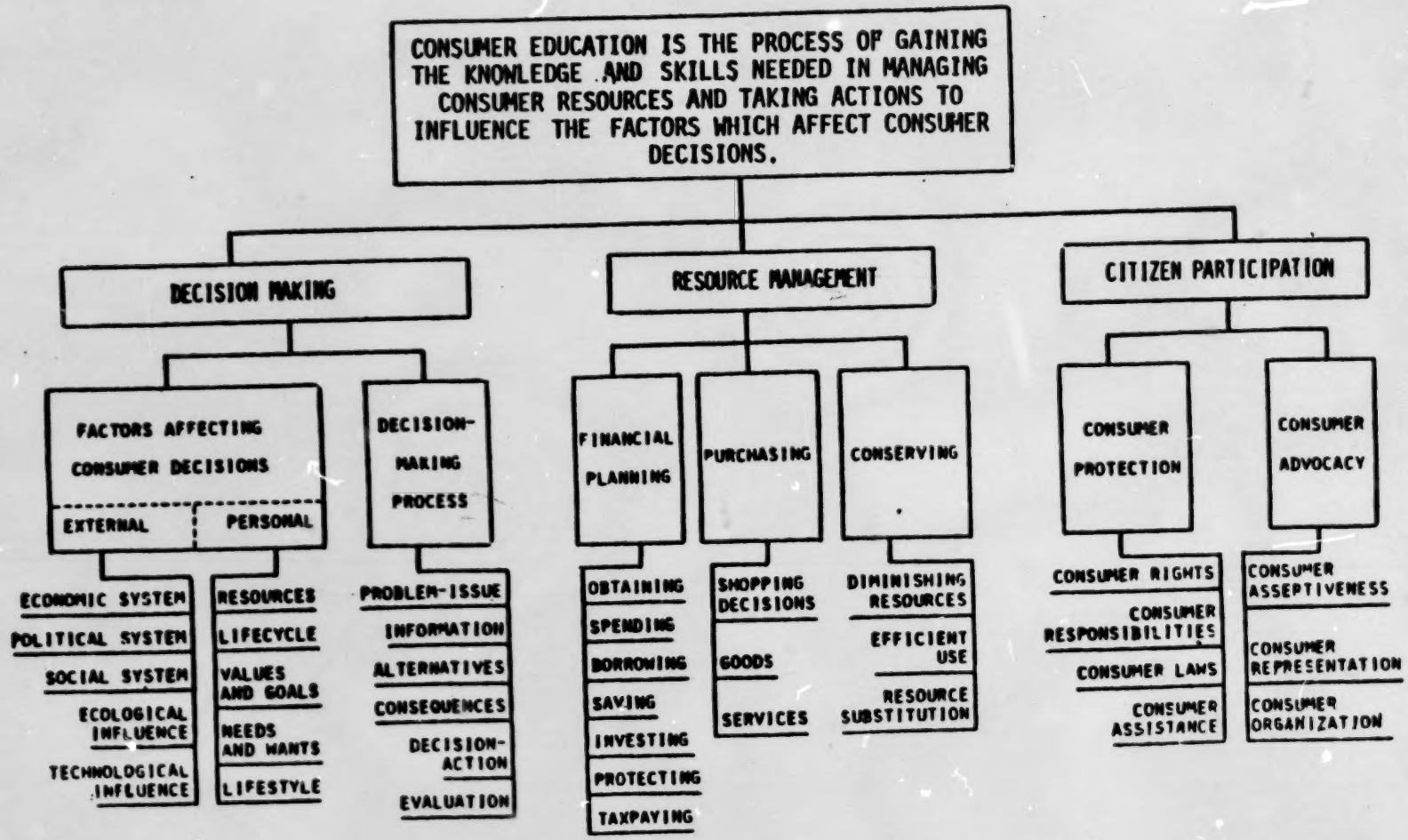

FIGURE 1. A CLASSIFICATION OF CONCEPTS IN CONSUMER EDUCATION(5)

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY, AS DEFINED BY DUANE ELGIN AND OTHER SOCIAL SCIENTISTS AT THE STANFORD RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN CALIFORNIA, IS A WAY OF LIFE THAT IS OUTWARDLY SIMPLE AND INWARDLY RICH. IT TENDS TO MOVE AWAY FROM A HIGH-CONSUMPTION, MONEY-ORIENTED STYLE OF LIVING TOWARD A BALANCE BETWEEN INNER AND OUTER GROWTH. VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY IS NOT EASILY DESCRIBED, BECAUSE THERE IS NO ONE CORRECT WAY TO LIVE MORE SIMPLY. EACH PERSON CHOOSES HIS OR HER OWN WAY OF EXPRESSING THIS WAY OF LIVING, DEPENDING ON CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES.(3)

IN A RECENT ARTICLE IN THE FUTURIST MAGAZINE, DUANE ELGIN IDENTIFIED FIVE VALUES WHICH SEEM TO BE CENTRAL TO THIS EMERGING WAY OF LIFE: MATERIAL SIMPLICITY, HUMAN SCALE, SELF-DETERMINATION, ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS, AND PERSONAL GROWTH.(4) LET'S EXAMINE EACH OF THESE IN TERMS OF THEIR APPLICATION TO CONSUMER EDUCATION:

1. MATERIAL SIMPLICITY. SIMPLIFYING THE MATERIAL ASPECTS OF LIFE IMPLIES A CONSCIOUS EFFORT TO REDUCE NON-ESSENTIAL POSSESSIONS. IN CONSUMER EDUCATION WE MIGHT ASK, IS THIS PURCHASE NECESSARY? WHY DO I WANT IT? WHAT ELSE WILL I HAVE TO GIVE UP IN ORDER TO BUY THIS PRODUCT OR SERVICE?

LIVING SIMPLY DOES NOT NECESSARILY MEAN THAT WHAT WE DO BUY WILL COST LESS. WE MAY HAVE FEWER CLOTHES IN THE CLOSET, BUT OF HIGHER QUALITY. THE FURNITURE WE CHOOSE MAY BE SIMPLE IN DESIGN AND FUNCTION, YET HANDCRAFTED AND MORE EXPENSIVE THAN MASS PRODUCED ITEMS.

2. HUMAN SCALE. PERSONS VALUING THIS IDEA PREFER COMPACT CARS, SMALLER LIVING SPACE, AND HUMAN-SIZED WORKING ENVIRONMENTS. THEY TEND TO EQUATE THE LARGE INSTITUTIONS OF SOCIETY, SUCH AS BIG GOVERNMENT AND BIG BUSINESS, AS BEING LARGELY INSENSITIVE TO HUMAN NEEDS. E. F. SCHUMAKER'S BOOK SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL, GEORGE McROBIE'S SMALL IS POSSIBLE, AND HAZEL HENDERSON'S CREATING ALTERNATIVE FUTURES, PROMOTE THE IDEA OF HUMAN SCALE.

AS THE REAGAN ADMINISTRATION TRANSFERS RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE NATION'S SCHOOLS FROM THE FEDERAL BUREAUCRACY BACK TO THE STATE AND LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCIES, IT IS BEING DONE WITH THE IDEA OF IMPLEMENTING A MANDATE FROM THE PEOPLE TO DECENTRALIZE, TO "GET BIG GOVERNMENT OFF OUR BACKS."

PHIL HART APPLIED THE HUMAN SCALE IN HIS APPROACH TO BOTH LIFE AND DEATH. HE CHOSE TO SPEND THE FINAL DAYS OF HIS LIFE AT HOME SUSTAINED BY PEOPLE HE LOVED, RATHER THAN IN A HOSPITAL SURROUNDED BY STERILE EQUIPMENT AND LIFE SUPPORT

SYSTEMS. CONSUMER EDUCATION CAN ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO CONSIDER HUMAN SCALE AS THEY MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT ALL OF THEIR LIVING AND WORKING ENVIRONMENTS.

3. SELF-DETERMINATION. THIS VALUE IS REFLECTED IN A DESIRE TO TAKE CHARGE OF ONE'S OWN LIFE, TO BE LESS DEPENDENT ON LARGE INSTITUTIONS, TO ESTABLISH A PATTERN OF SELF-RELIANCE, TO BE MATERIALLY SELF-SUFFICIENT.

PEOPLE WHO VALUE SELF-DETERMINATION ARE LIKELY TO FORM GRASSROOTS POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS TO INFLUENCE PUBLIC POLICY. THEY MAY PARTICIPATE IN BACKYARD GARDENING, HOME SEWING, COOPERATIVE BUYING CLUBS, AND DO-IT-YOURSELF CAR REPAIR. THEY RESIST BEING TIED TO INSTALLMENT LOANS AND THE EXPECTATIONS OF OTHERS.

ONE WAY CONSUMER EDUCATION CAN ASSIST THIS GROUP IS BY HELPING TO PROVIDE THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS NEEDED FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL DECISIONS. EXAMPLES OF CURRENT ISSUES WHICH CALL FOR INFORMED CITIZEN PARTICIPATION ARE NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS, ADJUSTABLE RATE MORTGAGES, AUTO SAFETY REGULATIONS AND CHANGES IN THE SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEM. WHAT FACTORS SHOULD BE CONSIDERED? WHAT'S FAIR? HOW CAN CONSUMERS INFLUENCE THE DECISION?

IN ADDITION TO TEACHING PEOPLE TO BECOME INVOLVED IN POLITICAL DECISIONS AFFECTING CONSUMERS, CONSUMER EDUCATION MUST CONTINUE ITS EFFORTS IN PERSONAL FINANCIAL

PLANNING. A SOUND FINANCIAL PLAN BASED ON PERSONAL VALUES AND GOALS IS STILL AN ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR PEOPLE WHO WANT TO TAKE CHARGE OF THEIR OWN LIVES.

4. ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS. PEOPLE WHO ACCEPT THIS VALUE BELIEVE THAT THE EARTH'S RESOURCES ARE LIMITED, AND THAT INDUSTRIAL GROWTH AND HIGH TECHNOLOGY ARE OFTEN IN CONFLICT WITH ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS. THEY SUPPORT AN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN OF REASONABLE GROWTH AND APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY. THEY ENCOURAGE SUCH ACTIVITIES AS WALKING, BIKING, CARPOOLING, RECYCLING, AND MAINTAINING THE BEAUTY OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT.

CONSUMER EDUCATION TEACHERS AND STUDENTS SHOULD DISCUSS THE QUESTIONS, HOW WILL MY CONSUMPTION HABITS AFFECT OTHER PEOPLE AND THE ENVIRONMENT? DO I HAVE ANY RESPONSIBILITY FOR SHARING MY RESOURCES WITH THOSE LESS FORTUNATE THAN I? WHICH POLITICAL CANDIDATE SEEMS MOST INTERESTED IN STRIKING A REASONABLE BALANCE BETWEEN ECONOMIC GROWTH AND OTHER SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS?

5. PERSONAL GROWTH. PEOPLE WHO VALUE PERSONAL GROWTH ARE OFTEN WILLING TO SIMPLIFY THEIR LIVES IN ORDER TO DEVOTE MORE TIME TO INTELLECTUAL, PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL ACTIVITIES. THEY EXERCISE IN WAYS THAT DO NOT REQUIRE EXPENSIVE EQUIPMENT, THEY TAKE TIME TO TALK WITH SENSITIVE PEOPLE, LISTEN TO MUSIC, TO READ AND TO MEDIATE.

THEY SEEK A BALANCE BETWEEN WORK AND LEISURE, AND TEND TO AVOID THE HIGH PRESSURE TENSIONS WHICH ACCOMPANY A STRONG DESIRE TO ACHIEVE. JOB SATISFACTION IN TERMS OF MEANINGFUL WORK MAY BE VALUED MORE HIGHLY THAN JOB SECURITY AND A HIGH SALARY.

CONSUMER EDUCATION HAS AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY IN HELPING PEOPLE MESH THEIR DESIRED LIFESTYLE WITH THEIR CAREER GOALS AND THEIR FUTURE EARNING CAPACITY. RATHER THAN TAKING SIDES WITH EITHER A "MORE IS BETTER" OR A "LESS IS BEST" CONSUMPTION PATTERN, CONSUMER EDUCATORS CAN POINT OUT THAT PEOPLE SHOULD BE FREE TO CHOOSE, BASED ON THEIR OWN VALUES AND GOALS.

IN MY VIEW, CONSUMER EDUCATION HAS IN THE PAST, FOCUSED TOO MUCH ON MATERIALISTIC CONSUMPTION -- HOW TO EARN MONEY, SAVE MONEY, INVEST MONEY, AND MOST OF ALL, HOW TO BUY THINGS WITH MONEY. WHILE SOME EDUCATORS HAVE HELPED STUDENTS SORT OUT THEIR PERSONAL VALUES IN RELATION TO THEIR CONSUMER BEHAVIOR, IN LARGE PART WE HAVE NOT CRITICALLY ANALYZED THE AMERICAN PREOCCUPATION WITH THE UNENDING SPIRAL OF EARNING, SPENDING AND CONSUMING.

IN CONSUMER EDUCATION, WE HAVE A CONCEPTUAL FRAME-WORK THAT SAYS THAT CONSUMERS INFLUENCE AND ARE INFLUENCED BY PERSONAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS AFFECTING CONSUMER DECISIONS. IF ENOUGH PEOPLE WERE TO SELECT

VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY AS A CONSUMER BEHAVIOR MODE, WE COULD INFLUENCE NOT ONLY OUR OWN LIFESTYLES BUT THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL FACTORS IN SOCIETY AS WELL. SEE FIGURE 2, A CONSUMER DECISION-ACTION SYSTEM, PAGE 14.

IN JULY OF 1980, AT A CONFERENCE OF CONSUMER AND ECONOMIC EDUCATORS IN CHICAGO, I MENTIONED THAT THE VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY CONCEPT HAS RELEVANCE TO CONSUMER EDUCATION IN THE 1980'S. THIS IDEA CREATED SOME POLITE SNICKERING, ESPECIALLY FROM THE ECONOMISTS IN THE GROUP, AND FOR THE REMAINDER OF THAT CONFERENCE MY FRIENDS LABELED ME THE "OUTHOUSE SIMPLICITY" LADY. I DIDN'T MIND THAT, BECAUSE I'M SOMEWHAT KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT OUTHOUSES, BUT I WONDERED WHY SOME ECONOMISTS WERE QUICK TO EQUATE VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY WITH LIVING IN POVERTY OR IN PRIMITIVE CONDITIONS. I WONDERED TOO, IF ECONOMISTS COULD ACCEPT VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY AS AN IDEA OF MERIT.

TO HELP WITH THE POVERTY ISSUE, I TURNED TO DUANE ELGIN'S NEW BOOK VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY. HE SAYS:

> "THE INTENTION OF THIS WAY OF LIFE IS NOT TO DOGMATICALLY LIVE WITH LESS. IT IS A MORE DEMANDING INTENTION OF LIVING WITH BALANCE. THIS IS A MIDDLE WAY THAT MOVES BETWEEN THE EXTREMES OF POVERTY AND INDULGENCE. SIMPLICITY, THEN SHOULD NOT BE EQUATED WITH POVERTY.
>
> POVERTY IS INVOLUNTARY WHEREAS SIMPLICITY IS CONSCIOUSLY CHOSEN. POVERTY IS REPRESSIVE; SIMPLICITY IS LIBERATING. POVERTY GENERATES A SENSE OF HELPLESSNESS, PASSIVITY, AND DESPAIR; SIMPLICITY FOSTERS PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT, CREATIVITY, AND A SENSE OF EVER PRESENT OPPORTUNITY. POVERTY IS DEGRADING TO THE HUMAN SPIRIT; SIMPLICITY HAS BOTH BEAUTY AND A FUNCTIONAL INTEGRITY THAT ELEVATES OUR LIVES. POVERTY IS DEBILITATING; SIMPLICITY IS ENABLING."(3)

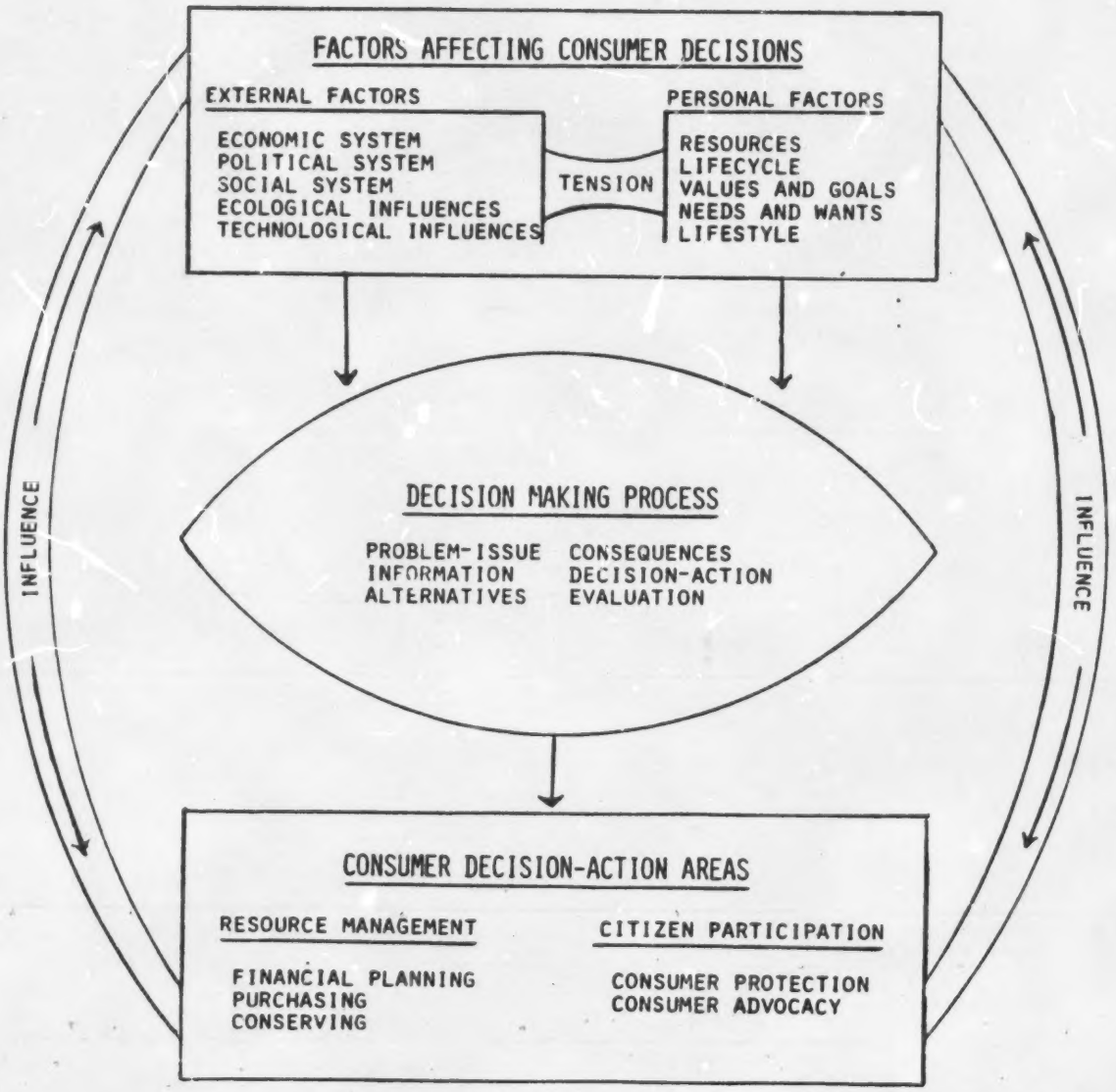

FIGURE 2. CONSUMER DECISION-ACTION SYSTEM (5)

YET CONSUMER EDUCATORS IN MICHIGAN MUST DEAL WITH THE PROBLEMS OF FAMILIES IN FINANCIAL CRISIS. UNEMPLOYMENT HAS BEEN IN THE DOUBLE-DIGITS SINCE 1979 IN SOUTHEASTERN MICHIGAN AND THE SLOW, PAINFUL STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL HEADS INTO WINTER ONCE AGAIN. WHAT HAPPENS TO A LAID-OFF AUTO WORKER WHEN HIS OR HER EXTENDED JOBLESS BENEFITS RUN OUT? WHO WILL HELP A DIVORCED MOTHER OF FIVE HANG ON TO THE HOUSE AND PROVIDE FOOD FOR THE KIDS UNTIL TIMES GET BETTER? THESE ARE GRIM TIMES OF FORECLOSED MORTGAGES, REPOSSESSED AUTOMOBILES, CROWDED WELFARE OFFICES AND BANKRUPTCY COURTS WHERE NOBODY WINS.

HOW CAN WE TALK ABOUT THE QUALITY OF LIFE WHEN DESPERATE PEOPLE ARE WORRYING ABOUT WHETHER THEY WILL HAVE ENOUGH FOOD AND HEAT THIS WINTER? THESE FAMILIES ARE BEING TOSSED INTO <u>INVOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY</u>, A KIND OF POVERTY FEW ARE PREPARED TO UNDERSTAND AND ACCEPT. WHILE VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY DOES NOT PROMISE TO SOLVE THE PROBLEMS RESULTING FROM UNEMPLOYMENT, I BELIEVE IT IS AN IDEA THAT DESERVES ATTENTION BECAUSE IT CAN POINT THE WAY TO A MORE BALANCED LIFESTYLE FOR US ALL.

WILL ECONOMISTS AND OTHER SOCIAL SCIENTISTS ACCEPT THE IDEA OF VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY? FOR ONE PERSPECTIVE, I WENT TO PERHAPS THE MOST FAMOUS ECONOMIST OF THEM ALL, MILTON FRIEDMAN AND HIS BOOK <u>FREE TO CHOOSE</u>.

ALTHOUGH FRIEDMAN DIDN'T SPECIFICALLY DISCUSS VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY, THIS IS WHAT HE SAID ABOUT PEOPLE TAKING CONTROL OF THEIR OWN LIVES:

> "THE TWO IDEAS OF HUMAN FREEDOM AND ECONOMIC FREEDOM WORKING TOGETHER CAME TO THEIR GREATEST FRUITION IN THE UNITED STATES...RELIANCE ON THE FREEDOM OF PEOPLE TO CONTROL THEIR OWN LIVES IN ACCORDANCE WITH THEIR OWN VALUES IS THE SUREST WAY TO ACHIEVE THE FULL POTENTIAL OF A GREAT SOCIETY".(6)

I DOUBT THAT MILTON FRIEDMAN WORRIES MUCH ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THE VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY MOVEMENT ON FREE ENTERPRISE ECONOMICS, BUT WHEN HE TALKS ABOUT RELIANCE ON FREEDOM OF PEOPLE TO CONTROL THEIR OWN LIVES IN ACCORDANCE WITH THEIR OWN VALUES, HE'S MOVING REMARKABLY CLOSE TO ACCEPTING THE VALIDITY OF VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY FOR THOSE WHO SO CHOOSE.

GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY SOCIOLOGIST AMITAI ETZIONI BELIEVES THAT THE NATION HAS REACHED A FORK IN THE ROAD REGARDING ECONOMIC GROWTH AND STABILITY. HE SAYS, "WE MUST DECIDE WHICH NEED GETS PRIORITY -- REVITALIZING OUR PRODUCTIVE BASE, WHICH WILL REQUIRE BELT TIGHTENING, OR CONTINUING ALONG THE PATH OF A CONSUMPTION SOCIETY, EATING FURTHER INTO OUR ECONOMIC FOUNDATION. WE CANNOT HAVE BOTH IN EQUAL MEASURE."(7)

THE VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY PEOPLE WOULD AGREE WITH PROFESSOR ETZIONI'S SENSE THAT CONSUMPTION HAS BEEN EXCESSIVE IN THE UNITED STATES AND THAT AN EXTENDED PERIOD OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE BELT TIGHTENING IS NEEDED. THE DIFFERENCE WOULD BE THAT ETZIONI SEEMS TO THINK THAT BELT TIGHTENING IS SYNONYMOUS TO SACRIFICE, WHILE THE VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY PEOPLE WOULD ARGUE THAT BELT TIGHTENING MAY ACTUALLY IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE.

SOME PEOPLE THINK THAT TECHNOLOGY WILL SOLVE OUR ENERGY SHORTAGES AND IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE. WE ARE EXPERIENCING AN INTERESTING SHIFT IN ATTITUDES ABOUT THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY AS AN ANSWER TO OUR ECONOMIC PROBLEMS. A NARROW MAJORITY OF THE PEOPLE, 52 PERCENT, HAVE CONFIDENCE THAT TECHNOLOGY WILL SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF SHORTAGES OF NATURAL RESOURCES.(8)

AT ANY RATE, WHAT HAD BEEN SEEN AS AMERICA'S UNLIMITED CAPACITY FOR GROWTH AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS THROUGH TECHNOLOGY IS NOW BEING SEVERELY CHALLENGED. THE VAST EXPANSION OF SOCIAL SERVICES, THE CRUSADE FOR A CLEANER ENVIRONMENT, AND SOARING INFLATION, HAVE PLACED A HEAVY BURDEN ON GROWTH IN RECENT YEARS. SO WE HAVE A MAJOR POLICY SHIFT IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, VAST REDUCTIONS IN SOCIAL SERVICES, DECREASED TAXES AND A STEPPED-UP MILITARY ARMAMENTS PROGRAM. IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN HOW EFFECTIVE THESE PROGRAMS WILL BE IN RESTORING THE PUBLIC'S CONFIDENCE IN THE FUTURE ECONOMIC WELL-BEING OF INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES AND THE NATION.

AFTER EXAMINING A WIDE SELECTION OF SURVEY DATA, MARKET RESEARCH ANALYST YANKELOVICH CONCLUDES THAT THERE IS A HISTORIC ATTITUDE SHIFT AWAY FROM TRADITIONAL AMERICAN OPTIMISM TO AN UNCHARACTERISTIC AMOUNT OF ANXIETY AND UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE NATION'S ECONOMIC FUTURE. HE OBSERVES THAT "ALTHOUGH AMERICANS SPEAK ENTHUSIASTICALLY ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF THE SIMPLE NON-MATERIALISTIC LIFE, THEY HAVE YET TO FULLY INCORPORATE THESE BENEFITS IN THEIR DAY-TO-DAY BEHAVIOR."(8)

BUT THAT'S WHERE CONSUMER EDUCATION HAS AN UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE A LEADERSHIP ROLE IN POINTING THE WAY TO ADJUSTING OUR LIFESTYLES WHILE IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE. WHAT IS NEEDED IS A BROAD SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL COMMITMENT TO THIS GOAL, AND SPECIFIC ACTIONS BY INDIVIDUALS TO ACHIEVE A MORE BALANCED WAY OF LIFE.

IF WE ARE TO ACCOMPLISH THIS GOAL, CONSUMER EDUCATION MUST CONTINUE TO GROW IN QUALITY, SIZE, AND INFLUENCE WITHIN THE NATION'S SCHOOLS, NEIGHBORHOODS AND WORKPLACES.. IT WON'T BE EASY TO STRENGTHEN CONSUMER EDUCATION AT A TIME WHEN FEDERAL FUNDS FOR EDUCATION ARE SHRINKING, BUT HERE ARE SEVERAL THINGS WHICH YOU CAN DO:

1. RESOLVE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE SIMPLICITY MOVEMENT. BEGIN BY ORDERING A COPY OF THE BOOK <u>VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY</u>, BY DUANE ELGIN. THE PAPERBACK VERSION COSTS $5.95 AND IS AVAILABLE FROM

WILLIAM MORROW AND COMPANY, 6 HENDERSON DRIVE, WEST CALDWELL, NEW JERSEY, 07006. THE TOLL FREE NUMBER IS 800-631-1199.

2. ORDER A COPY OF THE HIGH SCHOOL TEACHING UNIT TITLED SIMPLICITY, FROM INTERACT COMPANY, P.O. BOX 262, LAKESIDE, CALIFORNIA 92040. THE COST IS $16.00. ALTHOUGH THIS SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHING UNIT WILL NEED TO BE ADAPTED FOR USE IN CONSUMER EDUCATION, IT PROVIDES SOME EXCELLENT TEACHING IDEAS. EXPLORE THIS CONCEPT WITH YOUR STUDENTS. DISCOVER THE PLACES WHERE IT APPLIES TO CONSUMER EDUCATION -- TO THE QUALITY OF LIFE.

3. TALK WITH YOUR CO-WORKERS AND YOUR SUPERVISOR ABOUT THE NEED FOR STEPPED UP CONSUMER EDUCATION IN YOUR SCHOOL, OFFICE OR NEIGHBORHOOD. TELL THEM WHAT YOU PLAN TO DO, AND SUGGEST WHAT THEY CAN DO, TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY, SIZE AND INFLUENCE OF CONSUMER EDUCATION IN YOUR WORK ENVIRONMENT. THE NEW EDUCATION CONSOLIDATION AND IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 1981 REQUIRES THAT EIGHTY PERCENT OF THE 1982 FEDERAL EDUCATION BLOCK GRANT MONIES WILL GO DIRECTLY TO THE LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT, SO WORK WITH YOUR LOCAL BOARD OF EDUCATION. REMIND THEM HOW IMPORTANT CONSUMER EDUCATION IS.

4. WRITE A LETTER IN SUPPORT OF CONSUMER EDUCATION TO GOVERNOR MILLIKEN WITH A COPY TO STATE SUPERINTENDENT RUNKEL. EXPRESS YOUR CONCERN THAT A FAIR PERCENTAGE OF THE FEDERAL BLOCK GRANT FUNDS WHICH ARE SCHEDULED TO COME TO THE STATE AND LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS BEGINNING IN JULY OF 1982 BE EARMARKED FOR CONSUMER EDUCATION.

5. PROVIDE INPUT TO THE GOVERNOR'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE MICHIGAN EDUCATION BLOCK GRANT PROGRAM. WE ARE HOPEFUL THAT CEM AND THE MICHIGAN CONSUMER EDUCATION CENTER WILL HAVE REPRESENTATIVES ON THAT COMMITTEE. RACHEL MARINO IS THE CONTACT PERSON IN SUPERINTENDENT RUNKEL'S OFFICE.

6. PAY YOUR DUES TO CEM SO YOU'LL STAY ON THEIR MAILING LIST TO RECEIVE INFORMATION UPDATES ON THE STATUS OF CONSUMER EDUCATION IN THE STATE. BE SURE THAT YOUR NAME IS ON THE NEWSLETTER MAILING LISTS OF THE MICHIGAN CONSUMER EDUCATION CENTER AND THE NATIONAL CONSUMER EDUCATION RESOURCE NETWORK.

7. JOIN THE COALITION FOR CONSUMER EDUCATION, A NATIONAL EFFORT TO INFLUENCE PUBLIC POLICY AT THE FEDERAL, STATE AND LOCAL LEVELS. THIS GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATION'S ACTIVITIES ARE BEING COORDINATED BY

THE CONSUMER FEDERATION OF AMERICA IN COOPERATION WITH THE CONSUMER EDUCATION RESOURCE NETWORK. ELLEN WHITE IS MICHIGAN'S STATE COORDINATOR FOR THE COALITION. SHE'LL ATTEND A NATIONAL TRAINING WORKSHOP IN WASHINGTON, DC IN NOVEMBER TO DEVELOP A STATE PLAN FOR INFLUENCING PUBLIC POLICY FOR CONSUMER EDUCATION. SHE WILL NEED YOUR HELP IN IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN.

THE TIME IS NOW TO TAKE ACTION FOR CONSUMER EDUCATION. WE ARE ENTERING A NEW AGE IN WHICH THE ABILITY TO LIVE WITH LESS MATERIAL WEALTH WILL BE A PRIME ASSET. THIS CHANGE IN CONSUMER VALUES AND LIFESTYLES HOLDS GREAT PROMISE FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN AMERICA AND IN THE GLOBAL SOCIETY. IF CONSUMER EDUCATORS DON'T TEACH THIS IMPORTANT CONCEPT, WHO WILL?

IN THE PHIL HART TRADITION, LET'S CONTINUE OUR EFFORTS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR ALL PEOPLE, RECOGNIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF USING THE POLITICAL PROCESS, TEACHING THE SKILLS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION, EXAMINING OPPOSING POINTS OF VIEW ON CONTROVERSIAL CONSUMER ISSUES, AND ELEVATING THE HUMAN QUALITIES OF COMPASSION, INTELLIGENCE, AND INTEGRITY IN ALL OF LIFE'S DECISIONS.

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